

# *Documents on Diplomacy: The Source*

## *Our Relations have Reached a Crisis*

*A Dispatch from Secretary Seward to Charles Francis Adams, No. 10*

*Department of State, Washington, May 21, 1861*

**S**ir: This government considers that our relations in Europe have reached a crisis, in which it is necessary for it to take a decided stand, on which not only its immediate measures, but its ultimate and permanent policy can be determined and defined. At the same time it neither means to menace Great Britain nor to wound the susceptibilities of that or any other European nation. That policy is developed in this paper.

The paper itself is not to be read or shown to the British secretary of state, nor are any of its positions to be prematurely, unnecessarily, or indiscreetly made known. But its spirit will be your guide. You will keep back nothing when the time arrives for its being said with dignity, propriety, and effect, and you will all the while be careful to say nothing that will be incongruous or inconsistent with the views which it contains. . . .

The President regrets that Mr. Dallas did not protest against the proposed unofficial intercourse between the British government and the missionaries of the insurgents. It is due, however, to Mr. Dallas to say that our instructions had been given only to you and not to him, and that his loyalty and fidelity, too rare in these times, are appreciated.

Intercourse of any kind with the so-called commissioners is liable to be construed as a recognition of the authority which appointed them. Such intercourse would be none the less hurtful to us for being called unofficial, and it might be even more injurious, because we should have no means of knowing what points might be resolved by it. Moreover, unofficial intercourse is useless and meaningless if it is not expected to ripen into official intercourse and direct recognition. It is left doubtful here whether the proposed unofficial intercourse has yet actually begun. Your own antecedent instructions are deemed explicit enough, and it is hoped that you have not misunderstood them. You will, in any event, desist from all intercourse whatever, unofficial as well as official, with the British government, so long as it shall continue intercourse of either kind with the domestic enemies of this country. When intercourse shall have been arrested for this cause, you will communicate with this department and receive further instructions.

Lord John Russell has informed us of an understanding between the British and French governments that they will act together in regard to our affairs. This communication, however, loses something of its value from the circumstance that the communication was withheld until knowledge of the fact had been acquired by us from other sources. We know also another fact that has not yet been officially communicated to us, namely: That other European states are apprized by France and England of their agreement and are expected to concur with or follow them in whatever measures they adopt on the subject of recognition. The United States have been impartial land just in all their conduct towards the several nations of Europe. They will not complain, however, of the combination now announced by the two leading powers, although they think they had a right to expect a more independent, if not a more friendly course, from each of them. You will take no notice of that or any other alliance. Whenever the European governments shall see fit to communicate directly with us, we shall be, as heretofore, frank and explicit in our reply.

As to the blockade, you will say that by our own laws and the laws of nature, and the laws of nations, this government has a clear right to suppress insurrection. An exclusion of commerce from national ports which have been seized by insurgents, in the equitable form of blockade, is a proper means to that end. . . .we expect it to be respected by Great Britain. . . .we shall dismiss or demand the recall of every foreign agent, consular or diplomatic, who shall either disobey the federal laws or disown the federal authority.

As to the recognition of the so-called Southern Confederacy, it is not to be made a subject of technical definition. It is, of course, direct recognition to publish an acknowledgment of the sovereignty and independence of a new power. It is direct recognition to receive its ambassadors, ministers, agents or commissioners, officially. A concession of belligerent rights is liable to be construed as recognition of them. No one of these proceedings will pass unquestioned by the United States in this case.

Hitherto, recognition has been moved only on the assumption that the so-called Confederate States are de facto a self-sustaining

power. Now, after long forbearance, designed to sooth discontent and avert the need of civil war, the land and naval forces of the United States have been put in motion to repress insurrection. The true character of the pretended new State is at once revealed. It is seen to be a power existing in pronunciamiento only. It has never won a field. It has obtained no forts that were not virtually betrayed into its hands or seized in breach of trust. It commands not a single port on the coast nor any highway out from its pretended capital by land. Under these circumstances, Great Britain is called upon to intervene and give it body and independence by resisting our measures of suppression. British recognition would be British intervention, to create within our territory, a hostile State by overthrowing this republic itself. . . .

We are not insensible of the grave importance of this occasion. We see how, upon the result of the debate in which we are engaged, a war may ensue between the United States and one, two, or even more European nations. War in any case is as exceptional from the habits as it is revolting from the sentiments of the American people. But if it come it will be fully seen that it results from the action of great Britain, not our own; that Great Britain will have decided to fraternize with our domestic enemy either without waiting to hear from you our remonstrances and our warnings, or after having heard them. War in defence of national life is not immoral, and war in defence of independence is an inevitable part of the discipline of nations.

The dispute will be between the European and the American branches of the British race. All who belong to that race will especially deprecate it, as they ought. It may well be believed that men of every race and kindred will deplore it. A war not unlike it between the same parties occurred at the close of the last century. Europe atoned by forty years of suffering for the error that Great Britain committed in provoking that contest. If that nation shall now repeat the same great error, the social convulsions which will follow may not be so long, but they will be more general. When they shall have ceased, it will, we think, be seen, whatever may have been the fortunes of other nations, that it is not the United States that will have come out of them with its precious Constitution altered, or its honestly obtained dominions in any degree abridged. Great Britain has but to wait a few months, and all her present inconveniences will cease with all our own troubles. If she take a different course she will calculate for herself the ultimate, as well as the immediate consequences, and will consider what position she will hold when she shall have forever lost the sympathies and affections of the only nation on whose sympathies and affections she has a natural claim. In making that calculation she will do well to remember that in the controversy she proposed to open we shall be actuated by neither pride, nor passion, nor cupidity, not ambition; but we shall stand simply on the principles of self-preservation, and that our cause will involve the independence of nations, and the rights of human nature.

I am, sir, respectfully, your obedient servant,

**WILLIAM H. SEWARD**

*Source*

United States Department of State, *Message of the President of the United States to the two houses of Congress, at the commencement of the second session of the thirty-seventh congress*, Vol. I [Washington, D.C.: 1861]

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